

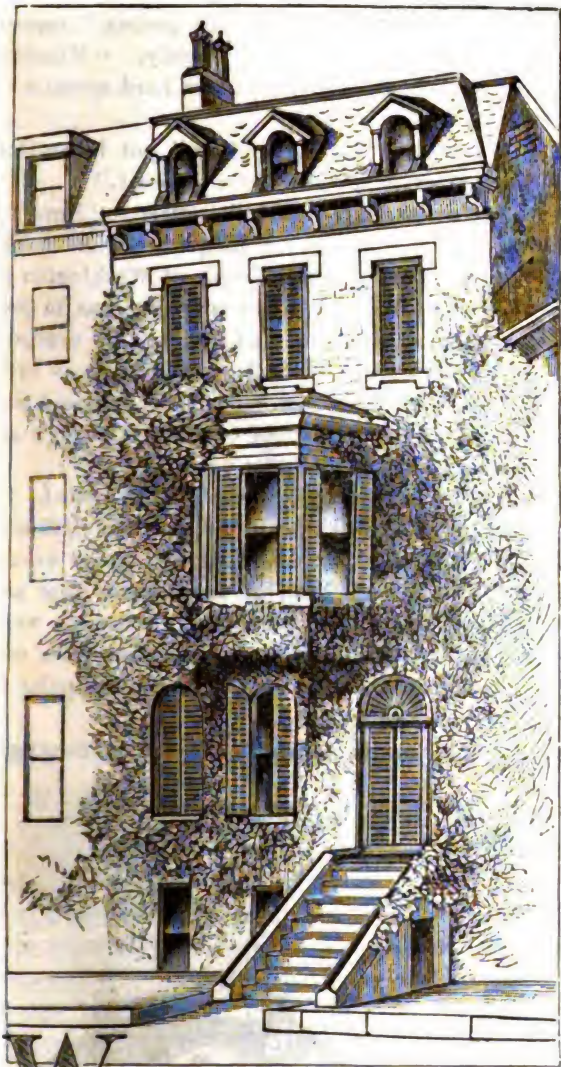
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HOMES OF AMERICAN POETS.

BY EMILY J. MACKINTOSH.



OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.

conversation restricted entirely to abstract subjects. It is something like what the "Nineteenth Century Club" of New York was, when it met at Cortland Parker's, and before it adjourned to Chickering Hall and became, in a manner, public.

The talk, the other evening, fell on the American poets. The meeting was at the house of a well-known critic, whose splendid library was thrown open for the occasion. He began the discussion by calling our attention to a series of water-colors, representing the homes of the principal poets of America; or, to speak more accurately, of the United States.

"Let us begin with Holmes," he said: "because, just now, in consequence of his recent visit to England, and his triumphal reception there, everybody is talking of him. But, after all, great as was his ovation, the English consider Holmes more a humorist than a poet even. Perhaps, critically speaking, they are not far wrong. But his *vers-de-société* have a fluent

WE have a club, which we modestly call "The Reading-Class," but which is, in reality, a club to discuss literature and art. We meet once a week, at the house of one of us, and listen to a lecture or reading, and afterward spend an hour or two in talk. All personal gossip, on these occasions, is forbidden and the



WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT.

ease that is only rivaled by *Praed*. His 'Old Po'shay' may be taken as a good specimen of his poetical ability in one direction; while his ode on the frigate 'Constitution,' which was immensely popular a generation ago, may be quoted as another, in a different line. Here is a picture of the house in which he lives, in Beacon Street, Boston."

"You think, then," I said, "we must go to Bryant and Longfellow for our leading poets?"

"Yes. This is where Bryant lived," he said; "at Roslyn, Long Island. The house was so concealed by trees and vines that one could not see what it really looked like; hence, I have had them left out in this picture: and I have done the same with the homes of Longfellow, Lowell, and others, for the same reason. Bryant was the first of our poets, in point of time, of any prominence. We ought, perhaps, to have begun with him instead of with Holmes. Joel Barlow, in the 'Columbiad,' undertook the 'heavy line,' as they say on the stage. But the era of the epics has passed, and the 'Columbiad' was hardly second-rate, even as an epic. It was the 'Thanatopsis' of Bryant that first convinced Europe that we had a poet in America; and, so far as his range went, a first-class one. Afterward, his 'Waterfowl,' his 'Marion's Men,' and others, all more or less different, proved his versatility as well as his genius. He has but recently

gone from among us. Many of us knew him quite well. Yet his 'Thanatopsis' first appeared nearly sixty years ago. To realize how long that is, we must recollect that, when it came out, California was almost unknown, and that no railroad had been built across the continent. Oregon, so to speak, was an unknown quantity."

"Do you, then, think Bryant," asked a lady present, "the best of our poets?"

"I only gave him priority in time, not in genius," replied the critic, suavely. "Which of

our poets is the best would be a hard question to decide."

"I thought that Longfellow," put in another lady, "was conceded to be the best."

"That depends," said the critic. "Here, by the bye, is a sketch of Longfellow's old home, the well-known headquarters of Washington at Cambridge. Longfellow's specialty was in presenting the thoughts and feelings of ordinary people, in language and with imagery a little better than their own. Someone has said that this is the test of a great orator. If so, is it not equally the test of a great poet?"

"Of a popular one, at least," I remarked.

"Just so. But we will not be hypercritical," replied the host. "Longfellow is armed so cap-a-pie in the affection of the people, that any attempt to assail him must fail: criticism, when hurtled at him, rebounds harmless from that impenetrable coat of mail. He is as popular in England, too, as here."

"Ah, that is because there is no copyright



HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW.

on his works," said one of the party. "When I was in England, I found his poems for sale at every railway-stall, at a shilling a volume; whereas, Tennyson could not be had for less than a guinea."

"And the consequence?"

"The consequence was that twenty people read Longfellow, in England, where one reads Tennyson, whom I consider incomparably the greater poet of the two."

"It is difficult for an American," said our host, "to speak of our poets critically. For, if he does, he is at once suspected of personal friendship. I remember once hearing, at a dinner-party, a gentleman—let us call him Jones—remark that he considered the quality of Lowell's genius to be much rarer and finer than that of Longfellow's. But, before I go on, let me show you Lowell's home, which is also at

Cambridge: another of those old-fashioned but spacious wooden houses of the last century."

He passed the water-color, as he spoke, from hand to hand.

"But about your story?" I said, at last.

"Oh, yes. Well, the speaker said that Lowell had written less than Longfellow, but bits might be picked out from his works far excelling anything in Longfellow's."

"Ah, I understand that," whispered my next neighbor; 'Jones is an old chum of Lowell, and wrote the first really critical article that appeared on his poetry. He sticks by his pet, for it is sticking by himself. You see,' cynically, 'his geese are all swans, naturally.' And I could tell of dozens of such cases. Nevertheless, to say nothing of Lowell's 'Legend of Brittany,' his 'Sir Lamfal,' and others of his poems, his 'Ode on Lincoln' will live



JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

when most other American poetry will be forgotten."

"But what do foreign critics say?"

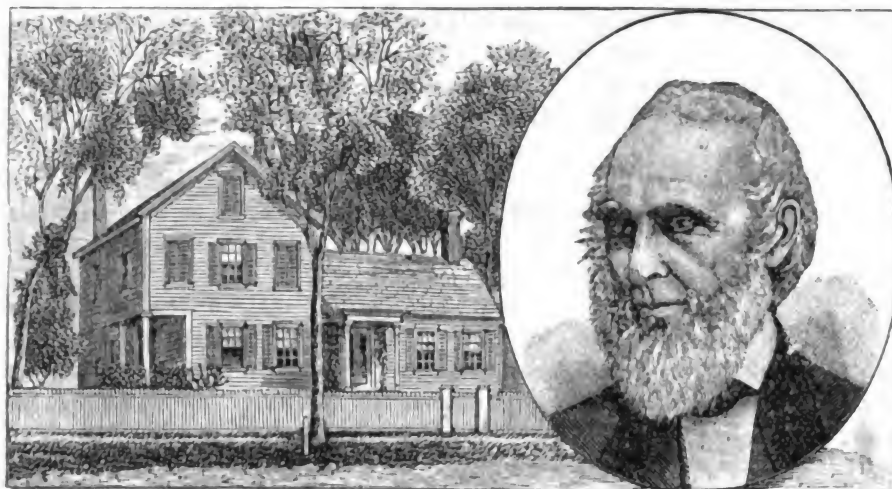
"Lowell is a great favorite, not only personally, but as a poet, with Englishmen. But, generally, English critics rank Bryant first. His love of nature has led them to compare him to Wordsworth. Others place Longfellow at the head. But, as a rule, Englishmen regard Bryant's muse as more exclusively and purely poetic, more thoroughly American, and more full of the calm and grandeur, the silence and immobility of nature, the universal and eternal aspects of human life and thought and feeling, than Longfellow's. They urge that Longfellow, except in a few of his best lyrics, has never approached the passion of Byron, or the vigor and fire of Scott. They say he is sentimental rather than strong, pretty rather than powerful."

"That is severe, and even unjust, I think," interposed one of the party, rather warmly.

"I am only repeating what the English critics say, not giving my personal opinion," replied our host. "Their verdict is that Longfellow is the poet of the home and the affections—the poet of the domestic hearth—nothing more."

"Where do the English place Whittier?"

"Here is Whittier's house; quite an unpretentious one, as you see," said our host, taking another water-color out of the portfolio. "An almost Quaker-looking residence in its simplicity. Yet, of all our poets, he is the most controversial as well as the most passionate and fiery. A 'mighty man of war' rather than a disciple of George Fox. Many of his poems are highly dramatic. He excels in invective. His indignation often reaches white heat. He is less finished than Longfellow, though he has more real force."



JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER.

asked. "I always heard that 'The Raven' was written in that way, but I never believed it."

"If there is anybody living that can tell us about the processes of Poe's mind, it is our friend here," said the host, laying his hand on the ex-editor's shoulder.

Of course, I still speak as English critics speak. I am trying to give the general drift of their opinion."

"How about Poe?"

"The French think Poe the greatest of our poets. Some, even, of the English hold that opinion. Here is Poe's cottage at Fordham, of which so much has been said." Our host, as he spoke, took up another water-color.

"The French like Poe because his mind was essentially analytical, like the French mind itself," said a retired editor who was present, and who had heretofore taken no part in the conversation. "He composed backward, so to speak."

"What do you mean?" It was a lady who spoke.

"I mean, that he said to himself: 'Given an effect to be produced, how is it to be done?' And he proceeded coolly to do it. Now, this is the very opposite of the way a synthetical mind works. In the latter case, the idea begins to glow as in a volcano; to boil to white heat; finally, to pour forth in a fiery torrent—to carry on the metaphor—of lava and of flame. Shakespeare and Burns were synthetical. Poe was analytical; he worked backward, as I have said."

"Do you really mean it?" I

"He and Poe, to my personal knowledge, occupied opposite chairs at the same table, in an editorial room, for years. For they conducted, together, a then popular periodical, and I have often heard them, myself, discuss what genius was, and how a poem should be written or a tale told."

"Yes," said the ex-editor, "it was a favorite theme with Poe. He would take up a passage of Milton, and say: 'What is it that makes this so fine?' Then he would analyze the passage. 'Now,' he would say, 'similar effects will be produced if one works in the same way.' But this is only repeating what I have already told. However, to make it more plain, let us go back to his story, that made such a sensation: 'The Murder in the Rue Morgue.' We were together when that was first published. One day, Poe said: 'I will write a story about a murder; but I will have it committed by an ourang-outang, instead of a human being. I will do this because, in most respects, an



EDGAR ALLAN POE.

ourang-outang would act like a man in such a matter, while the things in which he would act differently would be so few and so obscure that they would not be noticed—at least, at first. I will,' he continued, 'have all the best Paris detectives try to solve the mystery. Of course, they will all fail, because they will start off with the presumption that the murder was perpetrated by a human being; and so they will finally be foiled, because they will be met by certain facts that will utterly contradict their theory. Then I will let an amateur come in. He will say: 'Let us first look at these strange facts, gentlemen, that upset all your theories. What are they? They point unmistakably, in my mind, to the conclusion that the crime was committed by some creature which, though it had many of the attributes of a man, was really a brute, stronger than a man, and certain to

leave behind traces of a brutishness—as it has—that not even the most brutal man would leave. Now, who or what is such a creature? Why, some variety of the ape. And, of the apes, the ourang-outang comes nearest to man.' Acting on this principle, he wrote that remarkable tale, and brought it to us a few days afterward. And that is what I mean by his writing backward."

"Did he write poetry in the same way?"

"Precisely. The weird atmosphere, which makes mystical so much of his poetry, was deliberately chosen, to produce the very effect it did produce. The music of his verse—and few have approached it—was the result of a thorough study of the capabilities of the language in that direction. He would scan Shakespeare or Milton just as one would scan Virgil or Horace. Now, with most poets, rhythm comes by instinct; at least, to a great degree. It is born with



BAYARD TAYLOR.

them; and, if they scan, they scan by ear. With Poe, it was principally acquired. It was a work chiefly of mechanism, if I may say so."

"But wonderful mechanism."

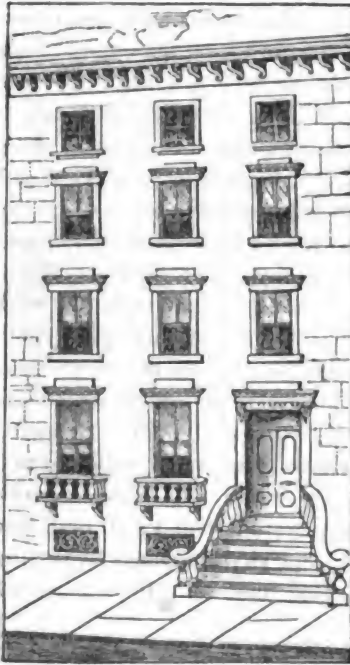
"Well, perhaps mechanism is too strong a word. Let us say, Poe was a great artist, and analytical in intellect rather than synthetical."

"I hardly understand yet."

"I will illustrate with Burns. His wife has left on record that, one evening, he went out into the farmyard, seeming preoccupied; there he walked up and down, crooning to himself, for half an hour or so; finally, coming in, he sat down and wrote 'Highland Mary.' His ideas, you see, overpowered him; they fermented, they burst irrepressibly forth. They were complete, too, at once. Now, Poe would sit down and say, as I have already told you: 'I am going to write a poem to produce certain effects.' And then he would proceed to build up his structure,

just as a mason lays stone on stone to make a house. Of course, it takes intellect to do this. But what kind of intellect? The analytical, I answer—working, so to speak, backward. Whether it is genius or not is another question. For my part, I think it is, though not of the highest kind; for the highest kind is synthetical. This is the kind of genius that Burns had. Now, as the analytical is not so spontaneous, it does not seem such first-class genius as the other."

"I think our friend's remarks," said the host, "will apply to all poetry—even to all fiction; and we ought to thank him for a very subtle bit of criticism. In fiction, for example, one sees at once that Dickens was a synthetical genius and Thackeray an analytical one. What our friend says about the French mind seems to me also to be quite true: it is analytical rather than synthetical. The English, Germans, and we



GEORGE HENRY BOKER.

Americans,
are the latter.
Of course, I
speak of the

mass. France has produced synthetical poets, just as we have had an analytical one in Poe. The distinction is too often overlooked, but it is because people do not go deep enough into the subject. All really great poets, moreover, are great artists. But, when you come to speak of Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Burns, who were essentially synthetical, you must put them in a different class from Pope or Poe, who were primarily and principally analytical."

"Dear me," said the editor's wife, a bright sparkling creature, "all this is quite above me; I don't understand a word of it. It puts me in mind of our clergyman, who, when I was young, said to me and other Sunday-school scholars: 'Children, the human mind is to be considered in two aspects, the concrete and the abstract.' Now, to this day, I don't understand what concrete and abstract mean, any more than I do what synthetical and analytical mean."

We all laughed at this sally, especially as the speaker, whatever else she could be accused of, could not be said to be either stupid or ignorant. She was

simply "chaffing" our critical talk.

"You saucy skeptic," said our host, laughingly. "If you are so ignorant, your husband should send you back to school. But we all know you better. We are forgetting our water-colors, however. Look at this. It is Cedarhurst, the country-house of the late Bayard Taylor."

"I remember some of his poems," said one of the party. "They were really very good."

"Yes, he just missed being first-class. He was a Pennsylvanian born, though he lived for much of his life in New York. The late Buchanan Read was another Pennsylvania poet. I remember that the North British Review said, some years ago, that one of his poems—I can't just now recall its name—was second only to Gray's *Elegy*. Certainly, no American poet has ever had more local color. Witness his 'Waggoner of the Alleghenies' and others."

"Is not Boker also a Pennsylvanian?"

"Yes. Here is where he lives, on Walnut Street, in Philadelphia. And his 'Francesca di Rimini,' by the bye, is the best acting play, which is yet also a poem, ever written by an American. The genius of Boker is essentially dramatic. Yet he has also great lyrical power. His 'Dirge on a Soldier' you must all remember. Like Lowell, he has been in diplomacy; was Minister, first to Turkey and then to Russia."



RALPH WALDO EMERSON.

"You have forgotten Emerson."

"Ah, so I had. Well, here is a drawing of his home at Concord. I have read, in some English review, that Emerson was 'often praised, occasionally read, but never understood.' Perhaps Matthew Arnold was the author of that sneer. Emerson's mind, in my opinion, was essentially Greek. Lowell, in his 'Fable of Critics,' says 'two-thirds Norseman and one-third Greek.' But I think the proportion should be reversed."

"You confine yourself to the older poets," said I. "What of the younger ones?"

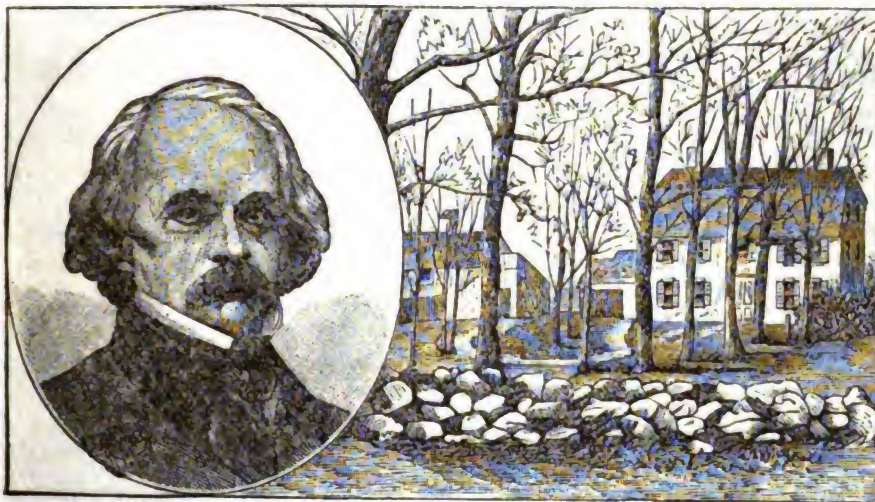
"Well, we have not time to discuss them. Their names are legion. Moreover, they have not yet been long enough before the public for one to venture on pronouncing a verdict as to their merits. The wine, so to speak, must first settle to the lees. Yet I could select, or think I could, poems from these younger poets that quite equal anything written by our older ones."

"I see you have one more water-color."

"It is the celebrated 'Old Manse,' at Concord, where Hawthorne lived. Hawthorne, himself, was not a poet in the technical sense of the word, as he never wrote in rhyme. But, in all the other qualities that make a poet, especially in imagination, many English critics say that he stands head and shoulders above all. I still quote the English, in preference to giving any private opinion of my own, for I might be accused of partiality, as the mythical Jones was in the case of Lowell."

"Oh, the English," said one of the ladies, with some little heat. "They write about what they don't understand, when they depreciate Longfellow and say Emerson is unintelligible."

"Have it your own way, my dear," replied our host, with a shrug of the shoulders and a smile all round. "Certainly, a pretty woman ought to know better than a cynical old critic what is a good poem, for she is a poem herself."



NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE.

FAR FROM THE FOLD.

BY BYRON WEBBER.

**Kiss thy babe, happy mother, while sweetly at rest ;
It is well it is housed ; in your love it is blest.
Smile down into eyes laughing back into thine,
Proud mother, blessed richly with corn and with wine !
Far lands and fine looms clothe thy darlings, and thou
Mak'st happy thy then with the beautiful now.
But the mother whose children are crying with cold,
She is borne down, and hopeless of finding a fold.**

**The hound's in his kennel, the steed's in his box,
And sheltered for night are the shepherded flocks ;
In his cave coils the fox, to her form cleaves the hare ;
The crows to their crazy tree-cradle repair ;**

**In his belfry, the owl finds enough for his need ;
While the rats, in the granary, revel and feed :
But the poor human sucklings are crying with cold,
Nigh starved and nigh naked, and far from the fold.**

**They always are with us—so near, ah so near—
The pitiful poor folk, and craving no tear.
They always are with us ; the torn garment's hem
Our velvet invades : and so, let us to them
With blessings God giveth us, that we may give
To His wandering weaklings, just asking to live.
Then hither, ye little ones, crying with cold :
Here are warm arms of welcome, and here is the fold !**